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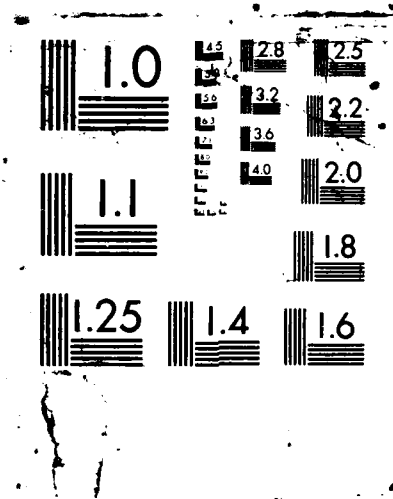
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## Misperceiving the Terrorist Threat

Jeffrey D. Simon

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# Misperceiving the Terrorist Threat

Jeffrey D. Simon

June 1987

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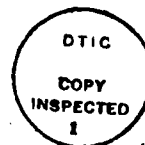
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## PREFACE

International terrorism has emerged as one of the most important issues of the 1980s. Research on terrorism has ranged from studies of the characteristics and tactics of various terrorist groups to the diverse threats that terrorism poses to Western nations. This report, which was written with the support of The RAND Corporation from its own funds, is not based on any specific research findings. Rather, it presents a line of argument that has implications for policy regarding the terrorist threat. It should be of interest to U.S. policymakers, as well as to the general public, for whom terrorism has become a growing concern.

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## SUMMARY

Although much attention has focused recently on international terrorism, there has been little discussion about whether or not terrorism actually threatens vital U.S. interests. This is rather surprising, given the widespread call for a counterterrorist policy of preemptive and/or retaliatory strikes. This report addresses the possibility that U.S. decisionmakers have misperceived the threat of terrorism, treating each incident as a "crisis" and trying to design high-level policies for what are essentially low-level threats.

There has been a tendency on the part of both the media and recent administrations to categorize all terrorist incidents as crises. This automatically heightens the public's assessment of the threat. However, it is the reaction to terrorist incidents that often creates the real crisis. The emphasis placed on searching for a "solution" to the problem of terrorism may put more critical security issues, such as regional peace efforts and relations with key allies, at risk.

The tendency to view terrorism as "war" has also created problems in trying to develop an effective counterterrorist strategy. The vast array of possible terrorist assaults on American citizens and facilities worldwide obviously cannot all be considered acts of war, so guidelines must be formulated for determining whether a particular bombing, kidnapping, or hostage incident requires a military response. One consideration must be the difficulty of locating and attacking those responsible for a terrorist incident. Moreover, there is a strong likelihood that innocent civilians will be killed in the retaliation process. Further complicating the issue is the high probability that military preemptive or retaliatory strikes will cause the terrorists to respond with even greater violence or to attack targets of a higher symbolic level. An escalating conflict between the U.S. military and terrorists worldwide would be a "war" that can never be won, given the multitudes of terrorist groups that exist and their ability to reverse any counterterrorist progress with one well-placed bomb.

Nevertheless, military measures against terrorists may be required at times. There also could be times when such actions can be carried out with minimal risk to American troops and American interests. But in designing an effective counterterrorist policy, distinctions must be made between those terrorist incidents that threaten vital U.S. interests and those that do not. Counterterrorist strategy regarding those incidents that can be absorbed by the United States with minimal or no damage to national security should be guided by a

different set of responses than those appropriate for incidents that truly threaten vital interests.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of how to combat terrorism has been debated in this country for almost two decades. When several aircraft were hijacked and American hostages were held in Jordan in 1970, one observer wrote: "For all his power, [the president] cannot even perform the first duty of government, which is to protect its own citizens, not because he is weak, but because his strength is so great that he dare not use it."<sup>1</sup> Another noted that "the immediate issue is whether lives can be saved without yielding principles and without destroying hope of Middle East peace."<sup>2</sup> The dilemma has become more critical today, however, because of the degree to which terrorism has permeated American politics and society. Combatting terrorism has become a top-priority issue in the minds of both high-level government officials and the average citizen. What has been ignored, though, is a very fundamental question: Are vital U.S. interests really threatened by international terrorism? And if not, should we be devoting as much attention to the problem as we have in recent years?

The debate in this country regarding military responses to terrorism reflects the growing frustration and anger the American public and government feel toward the new "enemy." It also reflects the pragmatism of American culture, which seeks straightforward solutions to the most complex and difficult problems. That there may not be a "solution" to this one, or that whatever solution exists may very well lie in long-term developments beyond our control, is something that has not yet been addressed. Yet the continuing expectation raises the stakes in the conflict and places American foreign policy at further risk. We may have already reached the point where the costs of searching for a counterterrorist strategy outweigh the likely benefits to be gained from implementing one.

What have been the costs thus far of the search for an effective strategy? First, placing the problem so high on the national agenda and then failing to deliver a solution has inadvertently played into the terrorists' hands. The element of fear has mushroomed and American foreign policy has been characterized by a perception of indecisiveness and impotence. By facilitating one of the terrorists' most important

<sup>1</sup>James Reston, "The Impotence of Power," *The New York Times*, September 11, 1970, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup>C. L. Sulzberger, "Foreign Affairs: Skyjack-Gnats and Sledges," *The New York Times*, September 11, 1970, p. 40.

objectives, publicity, the U.S. reaction has given terrorists a position in international affairs far more significant than their actions or capabilities would warrant.

Second, the problem of terrorism has been allowed to intrude upon the way the United States conducts its foreign relations. The most serious consequence of the 1979-81 hostage episode in Iran was that it preoccupied an American president for more than a year and pushed other issues that were far more important to national security, such as East-West relations and geostrategic developments, into the background. That there were no creative foreign policy initiatives during the last year of the Carter administration can be traced in part to the paralyzing effect of searching for a solution to the hostage problem.

The quest for a strategy has also strained relations with some of our most trusted allies, while at the same time elevating unfriendly governments to an international posture that the United States would have preferred to avoid. The damage done to U.S.-Israeli relations by the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985 and the prominent role that Syrian President Hafez Assad was allowed to play in obtaining the release of the hostages demonstrate the ironic outcomes that can result from attempts to resolve terrorist episodes. Secret shipments of arms to a state sponsor of terrorism, Iran, allegedly in order to free hostages held in Lebanon, and a "disinformation" campaign against another state sponsor, Libya, have eroded U.S. government credibility both at home and abroad. Terrorists have been allowed to gain the upper hand, not so much through their own actions as through our responses to those actions.

The essence of the present dilemma, then, is that the United States is trying to design high-level policies for what are essentially low-level threats. An effective counterterrorist policy will require a reorientation in the way terrorism and its effects on this country are perceived. The following issues will have to be addressed:

- The tendency to equate terrorism with "crisis."
- The roles that both the media and the government play in escalating the perceived terrorist threat.
- The possible negative long-range effects of viewing terrorism as war.
- The need to distinguish between those terrorist incidents that may threaten national security or geopolitical interests and those that do not.

## II. CRISIS AND TERRORISM

Of the multitude of international developments that have unfolded during the last quarter-century, only a few have been true crises directly involving the United States. This has prevented the public from becoming immune to such events, and it has ensured an audience for future incidents. The association of terrorism with "crisis" thus automatically heightens the perceived threat.

Presidents have traditionally taken the lead in defining for the American public the events that constitute crises. When the Soviet Union threatened to make a separate peace treaty with East Germany in 1961, thereby placing Western access routes to Berlin at risk, President Kennedy stated that "the faith of the entire free world" rests upon the U.S. commitment to West Berlin, and he announced that every American would soon be told "what steps he can take without delay to protect his family in case of [nuclear] attack."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, during the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy told the nation that the transformation of Cuba into a strategic base for the Soviet Union constituted "an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas."<sup>2</sup>

For the remainder of the decade, presidents continued to define certain international developments as "crises," even though the clearly drawn lines between the United States and the Soviet Union over Berlin and Cuba were replaced by more gray areas involving different actors without the capability to seriously threaten the United States. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, the Dominican Republic turmoil in 1965, and the seizing of the U.S.S. *Pueblo* in 1968 were all viewed by the Johnson administration as major crises that demanded action at the highest level. Although the media were assuming an increasingly critical role in reporting events, it was still the president who determined whether an international event would be viewed as a crisis.<sup>3</sup>

The potential for "crisis" to be associated with acts of international terrorism first occurred during the Nixon administration. In September 1970, when the regime of Jordan's King Hussein was being threatened by Soviet- and Syrian-supported Palestinian guerrillas, the

<sup>1</sup>*The New York Times*, July 26, 1961, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>*The New York Times*, October 22, 1962, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>It could be argued that the "crises" of the Johnson administration were not really crises, but were events that challenged U.S. credibility as a world power. However, when an incident is treated as requiring urgent action, the president appears before the nation to present his case, and all other issues are placed on the back burner, the term "crisis" appears to be appropriate.

Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked several airplanes bound for New York and demanded the release of Arab prisoners in Israel, Great Britain, West Germany, and Switzerland in exchange for the American and European hostages. In a scenario that would become all too familiar several years later, negotiations were conducted among several governments, military options were considered and rejected by the United States, and the hostages were released piecemeal.<sup>4</sup>

However, because the Nixon administration was already engulfed in an international crisis (the prospect of war in the Middle East and the potential fall of the pro-Western Hussein regime), attention was not specifically focused on the "terrorist threat." Since the conflict in Jordan occurred at the same time as the hijackings, and developments in each situation affected the other, it would have been difficult to view terrorism apart from the traditional concerns over peace and war in the Middle East. Furthermore, the hostage ordeal ended in a little over three weeks without any loss of American life, and no sense of national crisis over terrorism developed.

Things had changed considerably by the end of the decade. Beginning with the American embassy hostage ordeal in Iran, and continuing with recent events, terrorism has clearly become associated with the *notion of crisis*. This association cannot be attributed solely to an increase in the number of international terrorist incidents. Although terrorism has been on the rise, there were two years in the 1970s in which more than 300 incidents were recorded. Moreover, some years in the 1980s have had fewer incidents than the preceding year. In 1985, 480 incidents were recorded—the greatest number of any year—but preliminary figures for 1986 show a total of 415.<sup>5</sup>

Nor can the sense of crisis over terrorism be traced to any departure from the terrorists' tendency to single out U.S. targets for attack. For the past decade, the proportion of international terrorist incidents directed at American targets has remained between 20 and 32 percent. The greatest number of such attacks, in fact, occurred in 1977, when the United States was the target in 99 of the 306 incidents recorded; the smallest number occurred in 1984, when the United States was the

<sup>4</sup>Although King Hussein's troops freed a number of the hostages, several Americans remained in PFLP hands. They were finally released only after Switzerland, West Germany, Great Britain, and Israel agreed to release the Arab guerrillas being held in those countries.

<sup>5</sup>These data are based on the RAND Chronology of International Terrorism, which does not include incidents of indigenous terrorism, such as the ETA (Basque separatists) attacks on Spanish targets in Spain.

victim in 78 of 383 incidents. Preliminary statistics for 1986 indicate that 28 percent of the incidents were directed against U.S. targets.

The number of Americans who have lost their lives at the hands of terrorists also does not appear to be related to the association of terrorism with crisis. Except for 1983, when 241 Marines were killed in the bombing of their barracks in Beirut, American fatalities during the 1980s accounted for between 2 and 5 percent of the deaths due to international terrorism worldwide. In 1985, when more than 850 people were killed in international terrorist incidents, only 27 of the victims were Americans. In 1986, the U.S. share of the almost 400 worldwide fatalities was less than 3 percent.

Thus, if the sense of crisis over terrorism cannot be traced to any large change in the number of international incidents, the proportion of those incidents directed at U.S. targets, or the number of American lives lost, then the answer must lie elsewhere. It can be found, in part, in the nature of the recent incidents and in the reactions they have elicited from both the government and the media. What distinguished 1985 and the first half of 1986 from previous years was the rapid sequence of major, high-profile, dramatic terrorist incidents, several of which involved Americans. The hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in June 1985, in which one American was killed, was followed in the same year by the hijacking of the cruise liner *Achille Lauro*, in which a second American was killed. The juxtaposition of these two events—terrorism in the air followed by terrorism at sea—was in itself sufficient to make Americans believe that terrorists could strike at will, by any means, and through any venue. The midair explosion of an Air India jet en route to India from Canada, the hijacking of an Egyptian airliner and the bloody rescue attempt that followed in Malta, the massacres at the Rome and Vienna airports, the midair explosion on a TWA flight from Rome to Athens, and the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque frequented by Americans only added to this growing sense of vulnerability. The fear of terrorism continued during the summer of 1986 with the hijacking of a Pan American Airways jetliner in Pakistan, a massacre in a synagogue in Turkey, and a two-week campaign of daily bombings in Paris.

The ability of terrorists to launch dramatic attacks has led some to view terrorism as a threat of the highest proportion. Yet the following passage, written almost 15 years ago by a British observer following the massacre at the Munich Olympic Games, presents some of the same arguments that are being heard today:

Can anything be done to curb international terrorism, or must we accept that it will simply continue to grow—and if so, where can we expect it to end? . . . The flare-up of international violence on the scale we are witnessing today is far more dangerous than anything that has gone before: because thanks to modern technology sophisticated weapons in the hands of both governments and protesting groups pose a much greater threat to international law and peace. . . . No air traveller is secure from attacks by politically motivated, or paranoiac, or simply criminal individuals; no letter can be opened in safety; diplomats can no longer go about their business without fear of being kidnapped or of losing their lives; nobody can be sure he is not a potential hostage; no international gathering . . . is free from threats of violence.<sup>6</sup>

The threat to civilization, to democracies, and to innocent people is among the reasons being given today for viewing terrorism as “a growing threat to the maintenance of orderly society that is unprecedented in history.”<sup>7</sup> However, equating the threat that terrorism poses to *individuals* with a threat to democratic societies and governments underestimates the ability of some societies and governments, such as those of the United States, to withstand periodic outbreaks of terrorism. Countries that have weak democratic traditions, or underlying political, social, or ethnic-religious divisions may be fertile grounds for terrorists intent upon creating instability, but this is not the case for the United States.

Regardless of what the terrorist threat actually means, however, the perception of that threat has escalated in recent years, to the point where national security and U.S. vital interests are seen to be at stake during each major terrorist incident. The media have played an important part in this perception. Improved technology has enabled live satellite broadcasts of each incident and round-the-clock coverage of events. A sense of participation in the events and identification with the victims is a by-product of today's communications technology. The exploitation of the dramatic will always be an essential characteristic of the media, just as it will always be an essential characteristic of terrorism.

The media alone, however, cannot either create or deescalate the perception of a national crisis during incidents of international terrorism. Despite the enormous growth of the media during the last two decades, presidents still retain a great deal of influence in shaping and molding public opinion. While no leader would be able—or would

<sup>6</sup>Colin Legum, “What Is Terrorism?” *London Observer*, November 26, 1972 (reprinted in *Current*, January 1973, pp. 3–9).

<sup>7</sup>Yonah Alexander, Phil Baum, and Raphael Danziger, “Terrorism: Future Threats and Responses,” *Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1985, p. 367.

want—to relegate the current problem of terrorism to a secondary status, there is nevertheless a need to maintain a balance between demonstrating concern over a terrorist event on the one hand and preventing overreactions on the other.

Terrorist incidents and responses to them can be put in their proper perspective, as was demonstrated initially after the December 1985 Palestinian terrorist attacks against El Al Airlines counters in Rome and Vienna. The United States urged Israel not to retaliate for the raids, citing the more urgent issue of peace in the Middle East. In Washington's view, a military reprisal by Israel would have increased the chances that the peace efforts being made at that time by Jordan's King Hussein would fail. Furthermore, with Syria having placed surface-to-air missiles in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, the site of previous Israeli retaliatory raids, the possibility of a full-scale war could not be ignored. Although the United States subsequently reversed this call for restraint with a statement that justified military retaliation, the initial response indicated that at times the desire to strike back at terrorists, or to have others strike back, is tempered by more pressing issues that could affect U.S. security interests.

There is no doubt that terrorist attacks on American citizens and facilities become assaults on our national pride and national honor. The emotional and psychological impact on the public of such attacks is understandably great. Action is demanded, and no president can walk away from the event. In this sense, the distinction between threats to national security and threats to national honor becomes blurred. While the public may not always be able to "see" a national security threat, it is easy to see the death and destruction that terrorists inflict upon fellow Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, while presidents and high-level government officials cannot downplay the significance of international terrorism, they can influence public perceptions of the terrorist threat by refraining from statements and actions that promote the image of crisis. The public was naturally angry over the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979, but President Carter's cancellation of a scheduled trip to Canada in order not to appear to be leaving the country during an "international crisis," and his initial "Rose Garden" strategy of not going on the campaign trail in 1980 as long as there were hostages in Iran only served to

<sup>8</sup>Sometimes, however, increasing numbers of American casualties can lead the public to advocate withdrawal from a war effort despite claims by the administration that vital U.S. security interests are at stake. For the effect that the mounting death toll of U.S. troops during the Vietnam War had on public opinion, see Mark Lorell and Charles Kelley, Jr., *Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy During the Vietnam War*, The RAND Corporation, R-3060-AF, March 1985.



guarantee that the incident would be viewed as a "crisis" by the American public.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, high-level government officials issued statements throughout the 1985 TWA and *Achille Lauro* incidents that promoted the image of crisis. The presidential address to the nation as soon as the hostages from the TWA hijacking were airborne to West Germany added "stature" to the event. Early in 1986, President Reagan stated that Libya's sponsorship of terrorism posed a "threat to the national security." These statements and the numerous official warnings regarding U.S. military responses to terrorism have ensured that any terrorist event involving Americans will be treated as a crisis.

Terrorist attacks against U.S. facilities and citizens abroad are not limited to the actions of Islamic fundamentalists, Palestinian extremists, or Libyan agents. A wide variety of other terrorist groups have made the United States and NATO primary targets. The Red Army Faction (RAF) and the Revolutionary Cells in West Germany have attacked U.S. military bases and installations. In August 1985, the RAF took credit for a car-bombing that killed two Americans at Rhein-Main Air Base near Frankfurt. The RAF claimed that they had murdered an American serviceman earlier in order to use his identity papers to gain access to the base. Anti-NATO terrorism has been perpetrated by numerous European terrorist groups, including Direct Action in France and the Popular Forces of April 25 (FP-25) in Portugal.<sup>10</sup> In addition, U.S. embassies and diplomatic personnel have been victims of terrorism in most parts of the world. There is thus ample opportunity for terrorist events to develop into "crises."

Today, however, the situation has been taken one step further. In addition to being viewed as crises, terrorist incidents are on the verge of being defined as acts of war. The evolution of terrorism from crisis to war has serious implications for the future U.S. response to such events, as well as for U.S. foreign policy in the years to come.

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<sup>9</sup>Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1982, pp. 33-35.

<sup>10</sup>Thus far, anti-U.S. terrorism perpetrated by European groups has not elicited the same strong public and government reaction in the United States as actions perpetrated by Middle Eastern groups. This can be attributed in part to the more dramatic nature of the recent Middle Eastern groups' attacks, which have included hijackings of jetliners and cruise liners and massacres at airline ticket counters. That the targets of these attacks have been innocent civilians, while a significant part of Euroterrorism has been directed at U.S. military and NATO targets, may also explain the public's stronger reaction to Middle East-related terrorism. However, it is certainly within the capacity of the numerous European terrorist groups to launch the dramatic types of events that could become additional "crises" for the United States.

### III. TERRORISM AS WAR

"It is a war and it is the beginning of war."<sup>1</sup> Thus proclaimed Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger during the 1985 TWA hijacking-hostage episode in Beirut. One year later, Secretary of State George Shultz stated that the United States was "pretty darn close" to having a declaration of war with Libya.<sup>2</sup> Equating terrorism with war effectively ends any debate over whether military responses are justified: If a nation is at war, it must respond militarily to attack. Unfortunately, this perspective creates more problems than it solves.

The evolving U.S. position on the use of force against terrorists is in effect "a declaration of war against an unspecified terrorist foe, to be fought at an unknown place and time with weapons yet to be chosen."<sup>3</sup> For traditional forms of warfare, there are guidelines as to what constitutes an act of war, the most obvious act being the invasion of a nation's territory by a hostile outside force. Even for unconventional forms of warfare, such as guerrilla insurgencies, there are some basic characteristics that define acts of war. These include concerted efforts by groups of armed combatants to topple a government or gain control over a particular section of a country, such as through campaigns of rural attacks including direct engagements with the military forces of the existing government. While terrorism is used as a tactic by guerrilla insurgents (the New Peoples' Army in the Philippines has assassinated local mayors and uncooperative villagers), it is not the primary means used to achieve their goals.<sup>4</sup>

Terrorism, though, is different from both conventional warfare and guerrilla insurgencies.<sup>5</sup> It is primarily urban-based, carried out mainly by small cells of individuals who rarely engage the military forces of a government in direct battles. A primary goal of most terrorist groups is to create a climate of fear among the population by acts of violence.

<sup>1</sup>The New York Times, June 25, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>The New York Times, October 3, 1986, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Brian M. Jenkins, *Combatting Terrorism Becomes a War*, The RAND Corporation, P-6988, May 1984, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that the advantages in arms, manpower, and technology that the military forces of a state normally hold over guerrilla movements have led such movements to combine terrorist tactics and urban guerrilla warfare with traditional rural engagements with the state forces. Population growth in countries also means that guerrillas will increasingly operate from within civilian populated areas. See Christopher H. Pyle, "Defining Terrorism," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1986, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup>The issue of terrorism as a new type of conflict is discussed in Brian M. Jenkins, *New Modes of Conflict*, The RAND Corporation, R-3009-DNA, June 1983.

Also, unlike conventional and most types of unconventional warfare, terrorism can be perpetrated by a single individual to protest a specific government policy.

The vast array of possible terrorist assaults on American citizens and facilities worldwide obviously cannot all be considered acts of war, so guidelines must be formulated for determining whether a particular bombing, kidnapping, or hostage incident requires a military response. The "terrorism as war" perspective also requires a policy defining whether the United States will intervene in response to terrorist attacks on its allies.

Another issue is that of the appropriate military response. Strategies such as deterrence, preemption, and retaliation have a different meaning when applied to terrorist groups than when applied to nation states. The main difference lies in the concept of rationality, a critical component of deterrence. While it may be reasonable to assume that one government will react rationally to the policies of another, the same cannot be said for terrorist groups that utilize suicide tactics. It is likewise difficult to deter an enemy whose objective may be to create an escalating cycle of violence.<sup>6</sup> The amorphous nature of terrorism further complicates the issue. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to identify who is responsible for a given incident or to locate the terrorists' base of operations. Furthermore, since terrorists have the advantage of being able to move quickly from one location to another, intelligence about their whereabouts can quickly become outdated. Terrorists can easily merge into urban areas, thus ensuring that any retaliatory or preemptive attack will result in the deaths of innocent civilians.

Military responses aimed at either independent terrorists or state sponsors are also likely to result in an escalation of the conflict. Military reprisals or preemptive strikes can lead to retaliation that either is more violent or has greater symbolic value than previous attacks. This has been the experience of both South Africa and Israel. Similarly, immediately following the U.S. air raid on Libya, in which American fighter-bombers took off from bases in Britain, one American and two British hostages in Lebanon were killed. A group of Libyans also attempted to blow up a U.S. officers' club in Ankara, Turkey, and an American diplomat was shot in Sudan. In the summer of 1986, nine people were arrested in Togo for plotting to blow up the U.S. embassy and an open-air market. Two briefcases containing explosives, a grenade, and a pistol were seized. Togo authorities stated that the

<sup>6</sup>It is not necessary to eliminate every single terrorist incident for deterrence to be effective. That is obviously an impossible task. To the extent that a counterterrorist policy results in a significant decline in either the number or intensity of terrorist attacks, deterrence can be said to be working.

suspects confessed to having obtained the explosives from the Libyan embassy in Benin and were planning terrorist attacks in two other African countries.<sup>7</sup> Thus, if a government decides to use military measures against terrorists, it may have to be prepared to continue to use such measures in the future, and also to increase their intensity.

A U.S. war on terrorism would be a long conflict; it would also be unwinnable in the military sense, given the multitude of terrorist groups that operate throughout the world. Another important factor to consider is how the public would react to such a war. The assumption that military reprisals would end the American public's frustration and would satisfy their understandable demand for retribution may be valid initially, as was seen in the widespread public approval of the air raid on Libya. However, it is not clear that such support would continue if the United States made little progress in a war on terrorism, and if American military casualties during counterterrorist operations were to mount. Terrorists can reverse any counterterrorist "progress" or claims of "victory" with one well-placed symbolic bomb. This is what separates a war on terrorism from all other types of conflict. The problem can then become one of an alienated American public blaming the military for "losing" a war that never could have been won.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, military measures against terrorists should not be ruled out. There may be times when such actions are necessary and when they can be carried out with minimal risk to U.S. troops and interests. At the same time, however, the military might be prevented from compromising its national defense and security role by diverting its resources to an unwinnable conflict. Viewing terrorism as a long-term problem that may at times require military countermeasures, but that most likely cannot be solved by military means, will involve changing the national reaction to terrorist incidents. Emphasis must be shifted from the search for an overall "solution" to acceptance of the fact that certain losses will take place.

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<sup>7</sup>*Washington Post*, August 12, 1986, p. A11. A group that is the target of a military strike may not make its major response until several months after the incident. In December 1982, South African commandos raided African National Congress (ANC) safehouses in Lesotho, killing a number of ANC members as well as local citizens. The ANC set off explosions at a nonoperational nuclear reactor in South Africa a few days later, but the major retaliation did not occur until May 1983, when a car-bombing in front of the South African Air Force headquarters building in downtown Pretoria killed 17 people and injured 188.

<sup>8</sup>It is conceivable that continued terrorist attacks against Americans overseas could actually have the opposite effect on public opinion. Instead of turning the public against the military for its inability to win the "war," public support could be obtained for even stronger military measures. However, a protracted military campaign against terrorism that the public perceives as not being successful and that results in increasing American military casualties during counterterrorist operations could lead to a divisive period in American foreign policy.

#### IV. RESPONDING TO TERRORISM

The current U.S. position with respect to terrorism is similar to the U.S. position in the late 1940s with respect to the Soviet Union. The United States is searching for a doctrine to guide policy toward what is perceived to be an emerging threat. In the immediate postwar years, the emerging Soviet threat led the architect of the U.S. containment policy, George Kennan, to warn against overreacting to events or basing American policy upon "threats," "outward histrionics," or "superfluous gestures of outward toughness."<sup>1</sup> The same warning applies today in dealing with the problem of international terrorism.

Terrorist incidents are very sudden and highly violent. They are also highly publicized. In attempting to develop a strategy to meet this threat, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the protection of U.S. national security and the promotion of U.S. geopolitical interests are of primary importance. Protecting American lives abroad and punishing those responsible for violent acts against Americans overseas should, of course, always be a concern of the U.S. government. But these objectives should not take precedence over other issues that ultimately are more critical to the well-being of the entire nation.

The diverse nature of terrorism and its association with a variety of groups and state sponsors tends to preclude the design of any single counterterrorist doctrine or strategy. Whether the issue is peace in one region of the world or the potential for a serious strain in relations with key allies in another, U.S. responses to terrorism are inexorably linked to a variety of problems in world affairs. Acting as though U.S. vital interests are at stake during each terrorist episode increases the chances that a real crisis may develop that could lead to a superpower confrontation, to a war in a region of geopolitical interest to the United States, or to the sabotaging of peace efforts in troubled areas of the world—outcomes that may in fact be the terrorists' primary objectives. Overreactions to terrorist events also tend to encourage potential adversaries to take advantage of the U.S. preoccupation with such events to further their own interests in other regions of the world.

Thus, there appears to be a need to distinguish among different types of terrorism as to their potential threat to U.S. interests. It is necessary to determine where a response is warranted and where one may work, and most important, to determine where a response is

<sup>1</sup>X (George F. Kennan), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, p. 575.

consistent with long-term U.S. security concerns. Strategy to counter incidents that can be absorbed with minimal or no damage to national security should be guided by a different set of responses than those for incidents that truly threaten vital U.S. interests. The first principle should be that such responses be relatively low-level, to avoid placing the United States at more risk or diverting resources needed for other functions.

Low-level actions can include military operations, such as the interception of the Egyptian civilian airliner carrying the Palestinian hijackers who murdered an American aboard the *Achille Lauro*. Although this response caused some strain in U.S.-Egyptian relations, it was a relatively low-risk military operation, had a concrete objective, and had a high likelihood of success. Low-level responses could also include the use of surrogates to take more extreme actions against terrorists responsible for anti-U.S. violence. The surrogates, nationals of the country in which the United States has been victimized, would have the advantages of already being in the country, being familiar with the terrorist movements, and being able to initiate actions that would not be tied to the United States. This strategy, however, carries the risk that the local counterterrorist operatives may launch an unauthorized operation, as they reportedly did in a March 1985 car-bombing at the residence of Shia Muslim leader Sheik Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, if some form of physical response to a terrorist incident is called for, surrogate operations may be an attractive option. Surrogate operations could include the sabotage of terrorists' communications and supply headquarters, the infiltration of terrorist groups, and the capture of terrorist leaders.

Economic sanctions and diplomatic and political pressure also constitute low-level measures that could be taken in response to terrorism. Such actions, however, can realistically be applied only against governments that sponsor terrorism, not against the multitude of "independent" terrorist groups that exist. It is also difficult to get other nations that have substantial economic ties with state sponsors to agree to any economic retaliatory measures. Indeed, international cooperation on economic sanctions is almost as difficult to achieve as international cooperation on military measures. The U.S. experience illustrates this.

However, a greater number of countries could agree to firm diplomatic and political actions against state sponsors of terrorism. To the extent that the diplomatic missions of such state sponsors are

<sup>2</sup>Fadlallah was suspected by the United States of leading several attacks against American facilities in Lebanon, including the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine headquarters that killed 241 Marines. He escaped the attack at his residence uninjured, although more than 80 other people lost their lives (*Washington Post*, May 12, 1985).

either closed down or reduced in size and their potential operatives are expelled, the risk of terrorist incidents may be reduced. Yet even in the diplomatic realm, support from other countries is not guaranteed, as Britain discovered when it broke relations with Syria over the attempted bombing of an El Al airliner in London, only to find France continuing secret negotiations with Damascus in an effort to free French hostages in Lebanon.

The greatest promise for cooperation among Western nations in the battle against terrorism appears to lie in the area of intelligence gathering and dissemination. As an example, cooperation among nations helped to avert an attempt by a group of Lebanese Shiites to blow up the U.S. embassy in Rome in 1984. Authorities in Switzerland uncovered the plot and alerted Italian and U.S. officials, who took extra security measures at the embassy; Italian police were able to arrest the terrorists before they could launch their operation. The U.S. air raid on Libya caused many nations to take extra security precautions in anticipation of a wave of Libyan-sponsored retaliatory attacks. This heightened level of security resulted in the thwarting of the attempted El Al bombing in London, the arrest of a group of Libyans carrying grenades and other explosives outside the U.S. Officers' Club in Ankara, and the discovery of the plot to blow up the U.S. embassy in Togo.

Given the widespread nature of terrorism and its links to different causes and issues, however, the prospects of any single response significantly reducing the threat are questionable. Governments have had some measure of success in combatting the terrorist threat within their own countries, but not worldwide. The majority of terrorist actions directed against the United States take place on foreign soil, which complicates our response options, whether they be legal, political, economic or military. In countries where the terrorist threat is mainly indigenous, the power and inducements of the state, along with information provided by local citizens, can be used to curtail terrorist activity. The imposition of martial law in Turkey in 1980 and the subsequent mass arrests and increased police and military surveillance in that country greatly reduced the rampant terrorism that had become a part of daily life in the late 1970s. However, even the most stringent security measures cannot make a state terrorist-free, as the massacre at Istanbul's main synagogue in 1985 demonstrated. In Italy, the combination of increased police power and a policy of reduced sentences for terrorists who "repent" and cooperate with authorities has weakened the Red Brigades. Yet Italy also has been the scene of dramatic terrorist incidents, including the December 1985 attack at the Rome airport. And even the Red Brigades have not been totally defeated, as they

demonstrated by assassinating a leading labor union economist in 1985. A faction of the Red Brigades also claimed responsibility for the assassination of a leading Italian Air Force general in March 1987.

The governments of India, Spain, and West Germany have also increased their internal police and security measures to combat terrorism, yet terrorism continues to be a major problem in each of those countries. And countries that have in the past used military measures against terrorists outside their borders continue to be the victims of terrorist incidents.

There are instances in which terrorism can and should be considered a threat to national security. Terrorist events that may actually weaken defenses, undermine the stability of friendly or neutral governments, or directly threaten vital U.S. interests must be treated differently from the hijacking of an airplane or a cruise liner. In these cases, the term "crisis" can appropriately be applied to terrorism. It is not the choice of targets that makes a terrorist incident worthy of attention at the highest levels, but rather the implications of the incident for U.S. security concerns. "Unacceptable" incidents would include the obtaining and use of nuclear or chemical-biological weapons, the sabotaging and disabling of vital communications and electrical systems in the United States, and the destruction of vital military assets.<sup>3</sup>

Terrorism can also pose a threat to the nation's vital interests through the cumulative effect of attacks that go unanswered over time. Inaction tends to undermine the credibility of the country's will and ability to protect and defend its interests not only against terrorists, but against other potential adversaries as well. However, each incident does not need or deserve to be treated as a national crisis. As terrorism increases in volume and intensity, it will become more important to discriminate among the events. The practice of viewing all incidents involving Americans as crises and therefore threats to national security does not serve the nation's long-term interests well, and it tends to create more problems than it solves.

<sup>3</sup>There has been much debate over whether terrorists will eventually acquire nuclear weapons and whether they would actually use such weapons. For a discussion of this issue, see Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Future Course of International Terrorism*, The RAND Corporation, P-7139, September 1985; and Bruce Hoffman, *Terrorism in the United States and the Potential Threat to Nuclear Facilities*, The RAND Corporation, R-3351-DOE, January 1986.



## V. CONCLUSION

While the United States has been relatively free of terrorist incidents within its own borders, U.S. military and diplomatic personnel abroad have not been as fortunate. American tourists, businessmen, and facilities overseas have also been the targets of international terrorists over the years. This has led to growing frustration and anger on the part of the American public and pressure on the government to "do something" about the terrorist threat.

However, it is extremely difficult to counter a threat that is world-wide in scope, that is characterized by a multitude of diverse groups with varying tactics, and that stems from a complex array of political, economic, and ethnic/religious causes. Misperceptions of the terrorist threat to U.S. national security have led to attempts to design high-level policies to counter what are essentially low-level threats. Acknowledging that terrorism is not likely to threaten the nation's vital interests *unless* each episode is allowed to be perceived as a crisis may be the first step toward creating an effective and practical response.

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